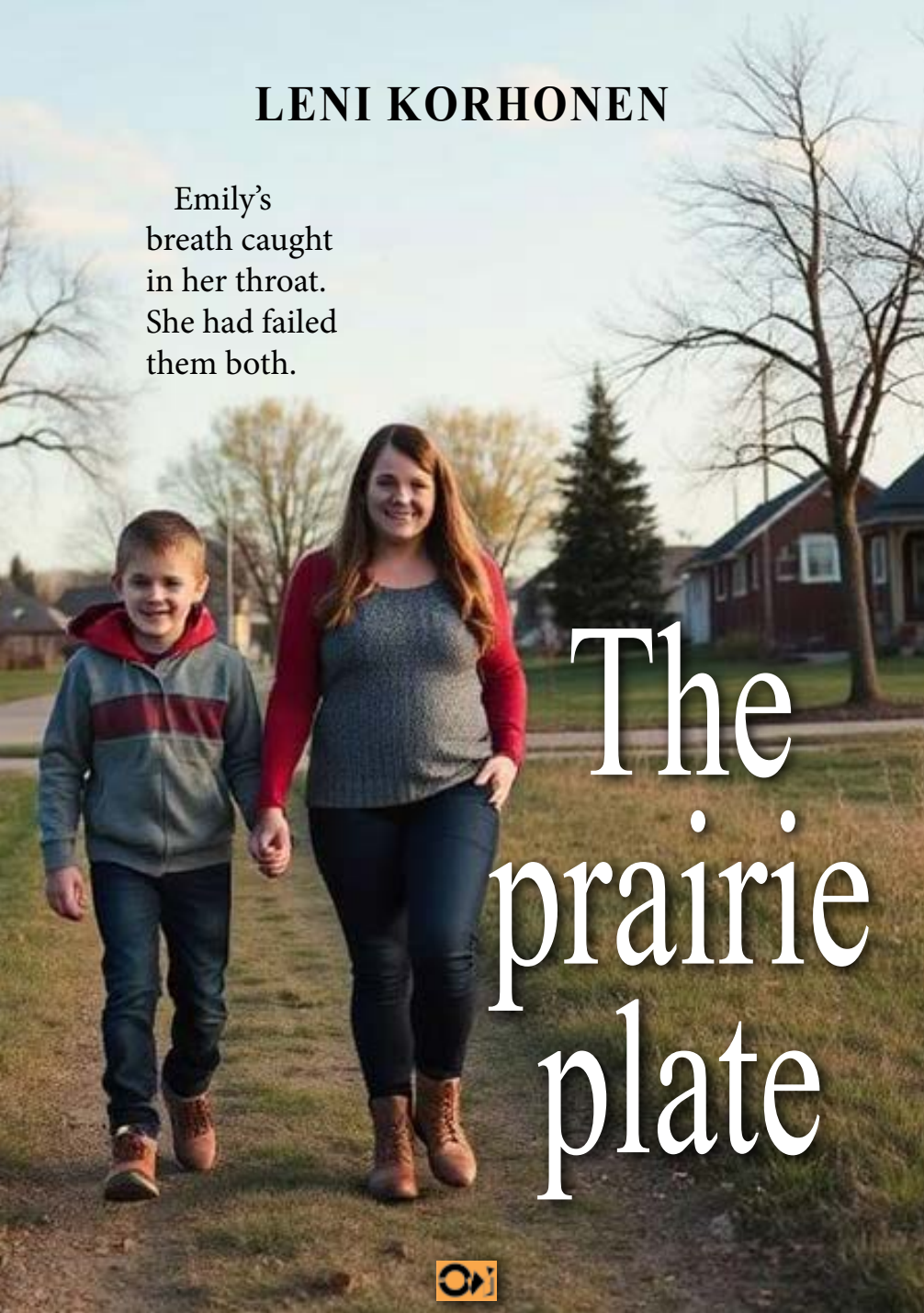
LENI KORHONEN
Emily's breath caught in her throat. She had failed them both.
The prairie plate

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Leni Korhonen

The prairie plate

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The night hung heavy over the small town of Woodhill, Nebraska. It was the kind of town where everybody knew everybody else's business or thought they did. The moon had risen high, but its light was dimmed by thick clouds rolling across the sky. Inside the small inn that Emily Thompson ran with weary hands and a heart full of unspoken fears, the only sounds were the distant hum of the old furnace and the soft rustling of the wind outside.

Emily wiped a bead of sweat from her brow as she set the last of the dinner plates down on the counter. She sighed, a sound that seemed to echo in the empty space of the kitchen. Her two children, Amanda and Joe, were in their rooms, each in their own world of thoughts, as distant from their mother as she often

felt from them. The world outside had always been so full of expectations, but here, inside these walls, it felt as though time itself had forgotten to pass.

She glanced at the clock, 10:15 PM. She had promised the kids she would spend some time with them after closing. The guilty feeling that gnawed at her stomach grew stronger. It had been weeks since they had truly sat together, shared a laugh, or even talked about their day. Life had become a blur of endless duties. Running the inn. Cleaning rooms. Serving breakfast. Handling all the guests. There was little time left for anything else. *And what about them?*

Her thoughts were interrupted by the creak of the door opening. Joe stood in the doorway, his arms crossed and a frown fixed on his face. At 14, he was a boy on the edge of manhood, his face already showing the lines of frustration and independence that Emily had feared.

"You promised," he said quietly.

Emily looked up at him, her heart twisting at the tone of his voice. She put the dishcloth down and took a step toward him. "Joe, I..."

"No, Mom. You promised," he repeated, his voice

rising with the quiet intensity of a young man who was already learning to resent the weight of responsibility on his shoulders.

Amanda, too, stood in the doorway, her small face framed by her messy blonde hair. She looked at Emily with wide eyes that seemed too old for her age.

"We don't matter anymore, do we?" Amanda asked, her voice breaking the silence between them.

Emily's breath caught in her throat. She had failed them both. The guilt, thick and suffocating, wrapped around her chest like a vice. But what could she do? How could she do everything for them? It wasn't just about the bills or the work or the small inn that barely kept them afloat. It was about her heart, which had been split into pieces and scattered across the floor of a life that was so far from what she had envisioned.

"I'm doing my best, I promise," Emily said, her voice quivering. But the words felt hollow even to her. "I'm trying. It's just..."

But before she could finish, the storm inside her own heart rose to the surface.

"We all are," Joe interrupted. "You're not the only one who's struggling."

Emily opened her mouth to say something, but the words died in her throat. What could she say to that? What could she say to a son who had become the man of the house in her absence, who had to take on burdens too heavy for his young shoulders?

She turned away from him, wiping her eyes quickly. "I'll be there soon," she said in a soft, defeated voice.

Joe and Amanda exchanged a glance, their faces full of confusion and hurt. Joe's eyes were hard, and Amanda's lips trembled, but neither said anything.

The door shut quietly behind them, leaving Emily alone again. She looked at the faded wallpaper, at the chipped counter, and at the silent, still house.

Outside, the wind picked up, and the storm clouds began to gather. *This wasn't the life I promised them.*

With a deep sigh, she stepped into the dining room, her eyes briefly catching the clock. 10:25 PM. It was time to close for the night.

I.

The sky above Glenmore stretched like an endless sea of pale gold, the sun sinking low beyond the vast, flat plains of Nebraska. The fading light filtered through the tattered curtains of the inn, casting long, uncertain shadows across the walls. Emily Thompson stood behind the counter, her tired eyes taking in the solitude of the room, as if the dimness itself were a reflection of her heart. The inn, weathered by time and neglect, had been her home for the past five years. Yet, despite its worn appearance, it was the only anchor she had left in a life that seemed to be slipping further away with each passing day.

The wind outside whistled a mournful tune as Emily poured herself a cup of coffee, trying to stave off the familiar ache in her head. She knew that her children, Amanda and Joe, were at home, but she could already feel the pull of the evening chores waiting to be done. There was always something that needed her attention. Always something that kept her from truly being there.

"Evenin', Emily."

She looked up to see Tom, the old man who had manned the front desk of the inn for as long as she could remember. His face was etched with the lines of time, and his hands, trembling with age, struggled to pour coffee into a mug. He was a relic of this small town, a lifer in Glenmore, just like most of its inhabitants.

"Evenin', Tom," Emily replied, trying to smile, though it never quite reached her eyes. She set the coffee pot down with a sigh. "How's the coffee today?"

"Same as it ever was," Tom chuckled, settling himself into the creaky armchair by the window. "Black, like your soul."

Emily managed a small laugh. "You've got a way

with words, Tom." She rubbed her temples, the weight of the day heavy on her shoulders. "How's the town holding up?"

"Well, it's Glenmore," Tom answered, his voice thick with the weariness of a man who had seen too many years and too few changes. "You know how it is. Folks come, folks go. But it's always the same. Small, slow, and nothing ever changes. Least, not in a way anyone notices."

Emily leaned against the counter, the mug in her hands warm, though it offered no comfort. "Yeah. Same as always." Her voice softened. "It's been like that for me too. Same old grind. Same old nothing."

Tom raised his weary eyes to her, his gaze sharp despite his years. "You're doing the best you can, Emily. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

Her breath hitched at his words. She wanted to believe him. She really did. But how could she? It never felt like enough.

"I never thought it would be like this," she whispered, more to herself than to Tom, her voice trembling as the weight of her words sank in. "I thought I'd be able to handle it better. I thought we'd be happy."

Tom's face softened, and for a moment, the years seemed to fall away, revealing the kindness in his eyes. "Life's never as easy as we think it'll be, darlin'. You can't control everything, no matter how hard you try." He paused, his voice becoming more gentle. "You've done more than most people could ever say. You've kept this place running, and you've raised two kids in a town that doesn't offer much to anyone, let alone a single mother."

Emily swallowed the lump in her throat, blinking back the tears that threatened to spill. She glanced at the faded photograph of her family that hung on the wall above the counter. Her husband, Steve, had been a good man, but he had been taken from them too soon, leaving her to pick up the pieces. She never asked for this life, but somehow, it had become hers.

"I don't know, Tom," she said quietly, her voice thick with the emotions she had buried so deeply inside. "They don't see it. They don't understand why I can't be there more. Why I can't just drop everything and take them to the park or make dinner like other moms." Her voice faltered as she spoke, the guilt creeping into her chest like a heavy fog.

"Maybe they don't see it because they don't need to," Tom replied, leaning back in his chair, his voice

slow but deliberate. "They might not know it now, but they'll see it when they get older. They'll understand that you're doing this because you love them, because you're trying to give them a better life than you had."

"But it doesn't feel like enough," Emily choked, her fingers tightening around the cup. "I'm always working. Always trying to stay ahead. And the kids… they need me, Tom. But I'm never there. I've become this stranger to them. I can't fix it. I don't know how."

Tom let out a long breath, his gaze lingering on her, full of quiet wisdom. "You're not perfect, Emily. None of us are. But you're trying. And that's more than a lot of folks can say. I see the way you care for them, even when they're angry, even when they don't understand. I see the way you work your fingers to the bone, trying to keep them fed, trying to make ends meet. That counts for something."

She closed her eyes, her heart aching at the kindness in his words. She wanted to believe him, wanted to believe that somehow, all her sacrifices would lead to something better. But it felt like everything she did only pushed her children further away. Joe had grown distant, almost resentful, and Amanda, her bright, hopeful daughter, had started to look at her with the same sadness that seemed to cloud Emily's every thought.

“I thought I could do it all,” Emily whispered, her voice trembling. “But now… I’m not sure I can anymore.”

Tom shook his head, a faint smile playing at the corners of his lips. “You don’t have to do it all, Emily. You just have to do your best. And sometimes, that’s enough.”

The door creaked open behind her, and Emily turned, startled by the interruption. Her daughter Amanda stepped into the room, her face etched with concern.

“Mom,” she said, her voice soft but insistent. “Joe’s been asking for you. He’s… He’s not eating again.”

Emily’s heart skipped a beat. She had been dreading this moment, but there was no escaping it. She knew what was coming.

“I’ll go talk to him,” Emily said, her voice rough with the weight of her own helplessness. She set the coffee down, taking a long, steadying breath before walking out of the office.

Amanda hesitated in the doorway, watching her mother with wide eyes. “Mom, you’re doing your best, right? You’re… trying, aren’t you?”

Emily stopped in her tracks, her gaze meeting Amanda's. The quiet question in her daughter's eyes made her feel as though the world had stopped turning. Emily felt the weight of it all—the weight of her children's needs, the weight of her own broken dreams, and the weight of a life she had never imagined for herself.

"I'm trying, sweetheart," Emily said, her voice thick. "But I don't know if it's enough."

Amanda didn't answer, but her eyes softened as she stepped closer to her mother, her small hand reaching for Emily's. "I know you're trying, Mom. I know."

Emily squeezed her daughter's hand, trying to hold back the tears that threatened to overwhelm her. She wanted to be the mother Amanda and Joe deserved, but sometimes, she felt like she was failing them. She wasn't sure what the future held, but she knew she couldn't give up, not yet. Not when her children still needed her.

And so, she pushed forward, one step at a time, even though she wasn't sure where she was going. All she had was hope—and the belief that somehow, someway, she would find a way to make it right.

II.

The days blurred into each other, like grains of sand drifting in the wind, lost in the vast emptiness of the long, drawn-out Nebraska summer. Emily moved through her routines with mechanical precision, each task a reminder of the weight she carried on her shoulders. The inn was always a haven of frantic activity, guests coming and going, demands on her time and energy but in the quiet moments, the ones she spent alone, the cracks in her life seemed to widen.

At work, she plastered on a smile, managing to keep her composure in front of the guests, her mind constantly flickering to the house she had left behind. She could hear Joe's silence, and though Amanda tried her best to fill the gaps with chatter and cheer, Emily knew her daughter's smile no longer held the same innocence. The house felt like a pressure cooker, the heat rising slowly, threatening to boil over.

That Thursday evening, when Emily arrived home later than usual, the house greeted her with a stillness that was almost oppressive. She hadn't seen her children all day, Amanda had been at a friend's house, and Joe had stayed home, holed up in his room. The air felt thick, stifling, as if something was brewing just beneath the surface.

She dropped her keys on the counter and set her purse down with a sigh, glancing around the kitchen. The smell of cold, untouched food hung in the air, a reminder of another evening spent alone.

"Joe?" she called out, her voice soft but carrying through the quiet house. There was no answer. She moved through the rooms, the floorboards creaking beneath her weight, until she found him sitting at the kitchen table.

Joe sat hunched over, his arms crossed, eyes fixed on the glowing television in the corner. The faint blue light cast a ghostly glow across his face, making him look older than his fourteen years. He didn't turn when she entered, as though she were a stranger, not the mother who had spent every waking hour trying to hold everything together.

"Hey, Joe," Emily said, trying to keep her voice

light, though the exhaustion weighed it down. “How was your day?”

Joe didn’t answer immediately, and the silence between them stretched taut like a string pulled too tight. Emily could feel his gaze on her, even though his eyes never left the screen. She moved toward the stove, distractedly opening the refrigerator, searching for something to do with her hands. She needed something to keep the tension at bay.

Finally, Joe spoke, his voice low and thick with resentment. “Are you gonna keep working like this, Mom?”

Emily froze, the words striking her like a slap to the face. She turned slowly, meeting his eyes for the first time that evening. The anger in his voice was barely disguised, but it was the hurt in his eyes that made her heart tighten.

“I have to, Joe,” she said, the weight of the words sinking deep into her chest. “We need the money. I don’t have a choice.”

“You always say that,” he muttered, his voice rising slightly. “But it doesn’t change anything. You’re never here. It’s like you’ve forgotten about us.”

Her breath caught in her throat. His words stung, and the pain of it settled into her bones. “Joe, I haven’t forgotten about you,” she whispered, her voice cracking. “I’m doing the best I can.”

But her words seemed to fall flat, as if the space between them had grown too wide to bridge. Before she could say anything more, the sound of the door opening caught her attention. Amanda, her daughter, stepped into the kitchen, her small face clouded with concern.

“Joe, let’s just eat. We’ll be okay,” Amanda said, her voice soft, as though trying to coax him out of the storm he’d created.

Joe looked up, his expression hardening. “I’m not hungry,” he snapped. “I’m not a kid anymore. I don’t need you to pretend everything’s fine.”

The words hit Emily like a physical blow. She watched, helpless, as Joe stood up from the table, his chair scraping loudly against the floor. He didn’t even look at her as he stormed out of the kitchen, leaving her standing there, stunned by the rawness of his anger. The door to his room slammed behind him with a finality that echoed through the house.

Emily stood frozen for a moment, her hand still gripping the edge of the counter. The weight of Joe's words hung in the air, thick and suffocating. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came. The guilt swelled inside her, a tidal wave threatening to drown her. Was she doing the right thing? Could she keep sacrificing like this, when it felt like everything she did only drove her children further away?

Amanda remained standing in the doorway, her face a picture of concern. "Mom… maybe we should just try to talk to him."

Emily shook her head, too weary to argue. "I don't know, Amanda," she said, her voice breaking. "I don't know if he even wants to talk to me anymore."

"You're doing your best," Amanda said quietly, stepping closer and wrapping her arms around her mother's waist. "He doesn't understand. Not yet."

Emily rested her head against her daughter's hair, feeling a small comfort in the simple gesture. But the ache in her chest remained, a constant reminder of the distance between her and her children. She had been trying so hard, too hard, maybe and still, it felt like it wasn't enough.

"I just… I don't know what to do anymore," Emily murmured, her voice muffled against Amanda's hair.

"You just keep trying," Amanda whispered. "That's all anyone can do."

The words, simple and gentle, were like a balm to Emily's wounded heart, but they didn't quite heal the ache. She had been trying for so long, but somewhere along the way, she had lost herself. Somewhere along the way, she had stopped being the mother she wanted to be, the one who could make everything okay, the one who could be enough. And now, she wasn't sure how to find her way back.

She drew in a shaky breath and pulled Amanda tighter against her, clinging to her as if her daughter were the only thing keeping her from falling apart. But even as she held on, the weight of it all felt like it was pressing down on her chest, threatening to suffocate her.

And then, there was a sound soft, hesitant footsteps approaching from the hallway. Emily pulled away from Amanda, her heart racing as she turned to face the doorway. Joe stood there, his face unreadable, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his hoodie.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, his voice rough.

Emily's breath caught in her throat. For a moment, she didn't know what to say. All the words she had been holding back, the apologies, the explanations, the promises, were stuck somewhere deep inside her, too tangled up in her own pain to reach the surface.

"You don't have to apologize," Emily finally managed, her voice hoarse. "I should be the one apologizing."

Joe shook his head, his eyes not quite meeting hers. "No. I shouldn't have said all that stuff. It's just… everything's so messed up right now. I don't know what to do. And you're never here, and I don't know how to fix it."

Emily's heart shattered all over again. She stepped forward, her arms open, and for the first time in what felt like forever, Joe allowed her to pull him close. The hug was tentative at first, but then he relaxed into her embrace, and for a brief, fleeting moment, everything felt like it could be okay again.

"We'll figure it out," Emily whispered, pressing her cheek against his head. "I promise. We'll figure it out together."

Joe nodded, his voice muffled against her shoulder. "I hope so, Mom."

And for the first time in a long while, Emily allowed herself to believe it, even if just for a moment. They would figure it out. Somehow. Some way.

But the road ahead would not be easy. The strain, the guilt, the distance between them—it wouldn't vanish overnight. Yet, in that quiet moment, the bond between them felt a little less frayed, a little more whole.

They still had time to make it right.

III.

The sun rose over Glenmore with its usual quiet determination, casting a pale light over the small, sleepy town. Emily stood by the kitchen window, staring out at the gray sky, the faint fog rising from the ground like a shroud. The world outside felt cold and distant, much like how she felt in her own home, her heart weighed down by the pressing sense that everything she had worked so hard to hold together was beginning to unravel.

It was a Saturday, though Emily hadn't yet learned to distinguish the days of the week with any clarity. The monotonous rhythm of her life, work at the inn, caring for the children, barely scraping by, had left her with no sense of time. But that morning, as she leaned against the counter, waiting for the coffee to brew, she couldn't shake the feeling that something needed to change. The inn had once been her escape, the one place where she could lose herself in the

work and forget about the cracks in her own life. Now, every creak of the floorboards, every squeak of the front door, reminded her that she was tethered to a life that was slowly suffocating her.

She glanced down at the clock, 8:15 AM. Late again.

"Amanda, Joe," Emily called out to the quiet house, her voice trembling despite her best efforts to keep it steady. "I need to talk to you both. Now."

The heavy silence stretched before she heard their footsteps, slow and hesitant, as if they were waiting for the storm to break. A moment later, Amanda appeared in the doorway, her small frame framed by the soft morning light. Her face, usually bright and full of energy, was now shadowed with concern. She could feel the tension in the air, the unease that hung like a storm cloud.

"Is something wrong, Mom?" Amanda asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Joe followed closely behind his sister, his face unreadable, his gaze sharp. At fourteen, he was already too familiar with the weight of the world, a weight he carried with stoic silence. But the cracks in his facade were starting to show, too.

"I know I've been distant lately," Emily began, her voice thick with emotion. "I've been so focused on work and keeping this place going, but I haven't been there for you. And for that, I'm sorry."

Amanda crossed her arms, a subtle frown pulling at her lips. "You're always sorry, Mom. But it doesn't feel like anything changes."

The words hit Emily harder than she expected. Her heart sank, and she felt the sting of truth in her daughter's voice. She had been so wrapped up in the daily grind of survival, in paying bills and keeping the inn afloat, that she had lost sight of what really mattered—the simple act of showing up for her children.

"I know, honey," Emily said, her voice breaking. "I've been so caught up in trying to keep everything from falling apart, that I forgot about what really counts. About you. About us."

Joe remained silent, his eyes cast downward, as if the weight of his own thoughts kept him from speaking. But his presence was a reminder of everything Emily had been trying to avoid—the growing distance between them, the resentment that had begun to fester in the spaces where love and care once lived.

"It's not just about you being here, Mom," Joe finally spoke, his voice quiet but firm. "It's about you *being present*. When you're here, your mind is always somewhere else, on the inn, on the bills, on everything else. You're not really with us."

His words, though spoken with an almost painful honesty, hit Emily harder than she anticipated. It was as though Joe had uncovered the raw, vulnerable truth she had tried so hard to bury. She had been so focused on surviving, on making sure they had enough to get by, that she had forgotten to live. Forgotten to be there for her children, to listen, to love.

"I want to be present," Emily said, her voice trembling with the weight of her emotions. "I do. But I don't know how to fix it. I don't know how to balance everything. How do I keep the inn running, pay the bills, and still be the mom you need me to be?"

There it was, the question that had plagued her for months. She had tried so hard, struggled so much, to hold it all together, but in the process, she had lost herself. And worse, she had lost touch with the people who mattered most.

Amanda stepped forward, her small hands planted firmly on her hips, a gesture of both maturity and defiance. “Maybe it’s not about doing everything,” she said, her voice surprising in its strength for someone so young. “Maybe it’s just about us being together. Even when things aren’t perfect.”

Emily’s heart clenched at her daughter’s words. Amanda was right. The world didn’t have to be perfect for them to be a family. They didn’t need grand gestures or solutions to all their problems. They just needed to be present for each other. And for so long, Emily had been too distracted by everything else to see that.

The tears came then, unbidden and relentless. Emily wiped them away quickly, but they kept coming, a flood of emotion she had kept dammed for so long. “I’ll try, I promise. I’ll find a way to be better,” she whispered, the words sounding almost like a plea.

Joe, who had been quiet for much of the conversation, looked up at her then, his expression softening. For the first time in weeks, he met her eyes with something close to warmth. A small, tentative smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

"That's all we want, Mom," Joe said quietly. "We just want you to be here. Not just in the house, but *with* us."

The simplicity of his words broke through the wall Emily had built around herself. Her chest tightened, and she felt a lump form in her throat. All this time, all this effort, and all her children wanted was for her to be present, to be there, in the moments that mattered.

"I'm here," Emily whispered, the words heavy with the promise of change. "I'm here, and I'm going to do better."

But even as she said the words, the doubts crept in, the fears that she couldn't truly fix everything. The pressure of the inn, the responsibility of providing, it all seemed too much. But in that moment, as she stood there with her children, she realized something vital—that perhaps it was okay not to have all the answers. Perhaps it was enough to try, to show up, to keep moving forward, one day at a time.

The silence that followed was comfortable, a soft, healing silence that wrapped around them like a blanket. Amanda stepped forward then, her small hand reaching out to touch Emily's arm. "We'll

get through this, Mom," Amanda said, her voice a soothing balm. "We'll figure it out together."

Emily nodded, her heart swelling with love for the two people she had tried so hard to protect. And though the road ahead was still uncertain, though the challenges were far from over, she knew, for the first time in what felt like forever, that she wasn't alone. They weren't alone.

And that made all the difference.

IV.

The sun had barely risen over Glenmore, casting a pale orange light through the lace curtains of the kitchen window. Emily sat at the small, worn table, a cup of coffee cooling in front of her, the faint steam drifting upwards like the last remnants of the hope she had clung to just the night before. She was tired, tired in a way that wasn't just physical, but deep in her bones, like a weight she carried wherever she went. But there was something new today, something tentative stirring in her chest. It was a feeling she hadn't had in weeks, months even hope, or perhaps the courage to keep trying.

She pushed her hair back from her face, staring into the cup as if the solution to her problems could be found in the bottom of it. But she knew better. Life didn't work that way. No matter how much she wished for an easy answer, she knew it wasn't coming.

The creak of the stairs broke the stillness of the house, and then a small voice called out from the hallway.

"Mom?" Amanda's voice was thick with sleep, yet there was an underlying note of concern.

Emily smiled softly, turning toward the sound. Her daughter, with her bright eyes and unspoken wisdom, appeared in the doorway, the morning light haloing her face. She was just a child, yet she had the weight of the world in her gaze, as though the cracks in their lives were becoming too clear to ignore.

"Good morning, sweetheart," Emily said, her voice carrying the weight of a thousand unspoken apologies. "Did I wake you?"

Amanda shook her head, stepping into the kitchen, still in her pajamas. "No, I was awake. Just... waiting for you."

There it was, the simple truth of her child's heart. Amanda had been waiting, waiting for her mother to show up, to really show up in a way that wasn't just about putting food on the table or paying the bills. She was waiting for Emily to be present, to love them with all the care and tenderness they had long since been deprived of.

Emily's heart tightened, the guilt creeping back in. How many mornings had Amanda waited for her, just like this, watching the clock tick away while she worked herself to the bone at the inn?

"I'm sorry, Mandy," Emily whispered, the words barely more than a breath. "I've been trying so hard... but I know I haven't been the mom you deserve."

Amanda stood there, her hands twisting nervously in front of her. There was a long silence between them, the weight of their unspoken words hanging thick in the air. Finally, Amanda crossed the room and reached out to place a hand on her mother's.

"It's okay, Mom," Amanda said softly. "We're okay. But... I miss you."

The simplicity of it struck Emily like a physical blow. She'd been so caught up in keeping everything together, in making sure they survived, that she had forgotten about the one thing that truly mattered: her children needed her, *not* just as a provider, but as a mother. A mother who was *present*, who listened, who gave her heart fully to them.

"I'll do better," Emily promised, her voice firming with resolve. "I swear it. I'll be here. For you and Joe both."

Amanda smiled, a faint flicker of hope in her eyes. "I know, Mom. I know you will."

But even as she said the words, Emily wondered how long it would take for her to truly change. The balance she so desperately craved seemed impossible. Every time she made one step toward home, the demands of the inn pulled her two steps backward.

It wasn't long before Joe shuffled into the kitchen, his face clouded with the remnants of sleep, his hair a mess of dark curls. He barely looked at Emily as he leaned against the counter, his arms crossed, his posture one of quiet rebellion.

"You're home early," he muttered, his voice carrying a note of skepticism. "Everything okay at the inn?"

"Everything's fine," Emily said quickly, her voice betraying her. Joe wasn't fooled by the feigned calm in her tone. He'd learned to read her like a book long ago. The sharpness in his eyes told her as much.

"Then why're you here? You don't usually come home until after dark."

She knew that Joe was aware of her struggle, of the constant push and pull between work and home. He

was growing up too fast, seeing more than a boy his age should.

"I'm trying, Joe," Emily said, her voice quiet but filled with determination. "Trying to be better. To be here."

Joe's gaze softened for a moment, though his words remained blunt. "I'm not a little kid anymore, Mom. I get it. It's just... sometimes, I feel like you're a ghost in this house. And it's not fair to Amanda."

Emily swallowed hard, the lump in her throat threatening to choke her. "I know," she whispered. "I know. And I'm sorry."

Joe didn't answer immediately, his eyes flickering to Amanda and back to Emily. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, he sighed deeply, his shoulders sagging.

"I don't expect you to be perfect, Mom," Joe muttered. "I just want to know you're *here*, with us. That you're not too busy to care."

The honesty in Joe's words was a blow, but a necessary one. Emily closed her eyes for a moment, steeling herself against the surge of emotion. She'd

spent too long ignoring the subtle calls for attention, for affection. But no more. Not today.

"I'll be here, Joe," Emily promised again, her voice firm, though it trembled with the weight of her own self-doubt. "I'll be here for both of you."

* * * * *

Later that evening, the small house felt more like a home than it had in months. Emily had made a simple dinner, spaghetti, nothing fancy but it was a meal they had eaten together countless times. The routine of their evening felt soothing, like a balm for wounds they had never quite known how to heal. Joe sat at the head of the table, Amanda beside him, and Emily across from them.

The conversation was light at first, small talk about school and the inn. Amanda had been practicing a song for the upcoming school play, and Joe had been working on a new set of drawings for his art class. The topics were simple, but for Emily, they were precious. They were pieces of a life she had nearly lost in the whirlwind of survival.

As the meal wound down, Amanda leaned forward, her face serious for a moment.

"Mom?" she asked, her voice tentative. "You're really going to stay, right? I mean, *really* stay?"

Emily felt a tug at her heart, but she forced a smile. "I'm here, Mandy. I'm not going anywhere."

Joe looked up then, a small, understanding smile playing at the corner of his lips. "You don't have to be perfect, Mom. Just... be with us."

Emily nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat. "I will. I promise."

And in that moment, with the sound of laughter ringing through the house and the warmth of her children surrounding her, Emily realized that the perfection she had been chasing was never meant to be. What mattered most was that she kept showing up, that she kept trying. She didn't have to have all the answers, didn't have to fix everything. She just had to be there, present in the quiet moments, in the chaos, in the simple, imperfect act of living.

The evening passed, and though Emily knew that the challenges would return in the days ahead, she had something she hadn't had in so long: hope. And with it, the knowledge that she was not alone. She had her children. And for them, she would always find a way.

V.

The storm had come in the night, fierce and unrelenting, a harbinger of what was to come. The wind whipped through the trees with an angry cry, and the old house creaked under the pressure, as though it, too, was trying to hold onto something fragile. But in the kitchen, the warmth of the stove and the soft hum of the morning radio made it seem, for just a moment, as though everything was right in the world.

Emily stood at the stove, her hands trembling as she stirred the pot of soup, the scent of garlic and onion filling the air. She tried to ignore the gnawing sense of dread that had settled in her chest like a weight she could not shake. There had been so many days like this, so many mornings when the weight of everything seemed to press down, suffocating her. But now, as the cold wind howled outside, she could not escape the feeling that the storm inside her was coming to a head.

"Mom?" It was Amanda's voice, a soft question that carried the weight of the world.

Emily looked over her shoulder, forcing a smile. "Yes, honey?"

Amanda, pale and uncertain, stood in the doorway, her hands clutching the hem of her dress. "I heard you arguing with Mr. Winters last night. Are we... are we okay?"

The question hung in the air, simple and direct, and yet, it seemed to open the floodgates of everything Emily had been trying to keep hidden.

She turned away from the stove, the wooden spoon falling from her grasp. She was no good at hiding her emotions anymore. Not from Amanda, not from Joe. And the realization felt like a knife twisting in her gut.

"It wasn't really an argument, sweetheart," Emily said, her voice tight. "Just... a misunderstanding. We're fine."

But as she spoke the words, she knew they were hollow, a lie stitched together with the fraying threads of her patience. Mr. Winters, the inn's owner, had been growing increasingly difficult to work with. He

was demanding, critical, and his expectations seemed to grow by the day. He had been threatening to sell the inn, a place Emily had poured her heart into and the prospect of losing it was a blow she could not bear to face.

Amanda didn't buy it. She never did.

"You're lying, Mom," she said, her voice small, but filled with a quiet strength that struck Emily like a thunderclap. "I can see it. You're not fine. And you haven't been fine for a long time."

The words hung in the air between them, a bitter truth that neither of them could escape.

Before Emily could respond, Joe appeared in the doorway, his face pale, his eyes wide with the same quiet understanding that seemed to have taken root in him over the past few months.

"What's going on, Mom?" he asked, his voice more serious than usual.

Emily felt a pang of guilt, a sudden rush of love for her children, and for the first time in what felt like ages, she realized how much she had been hiding. How much she had been holding in, trying to protect them, trying to make it all work, when all along, she

was slowly unraveling.

The weight of her secrets, the financial strain, the endless hours of work, the threats from Mr. Winters, it all pressed down on her like a storm cloud, suffocating her from the inside out.

"I'm sorry, you two," Emily whispered, her voice thick with emotion. She closed her eyes, fighting back the tears that threatened to fall. "I'm trying. I really am. But I don't know how much longer I can keep it together. I'm scared, and I'm tired, and I feel like I'm failing you both."

Amanda stepped forward, her small hand reaching out to touch her mother's arm. "You're not failing us, Mom. You're doing everything you can. And that's enough."

But even as Amanda said the words, Emily knew that wasn't true. It wasn't enough. It could never be enough.

Joe, standing in the doorway, his eyes shadowed with the weight of his own thoughts, spoke quietly, his voice steady. "Mom, maybe it's time to tell us what's really going on. You don't have to carry all of this alone. We're here, and we can help."

The words, simple and true, cut through Emily like a knife. How had she let it get this far? How had she let her children see her like this, broken and fragile? She had always tried to shield them from her burdens, but now they were standing before her, asking to help.

And for the first time, Emily felt a sliver of hope, a fragile, trembling thing, but there nonetheless. Maybe, just maybe, she didn't have to carry it all on her own.

With a trembling breath, she nodded. "You're right," she whispered, her voice cracking. "I've been so afraid of letting you both down, that I've been keeping everything from you. But it's getting harder, and I don't know what to do anymore."

Joe stepped into the kitchen, his gaze soft but unwavering. "Mom, we're a team. We always have been. We'll get through this, together."

For a moment, everything was still. The storm outside continued to rage, but inside, in the warmth of her kitchen, a sense of calm settled over them. Emily felt the first real breath in days. Her children were with her, truly with her and together, they would face whatever came next.

But as the silence lingered, a soft knock sounded at the door.

Emily's heart skipped a beat. She knew who it was before she even opened it.

Mr. Winters stood on the doorstep, his tall frame casting a long shadow over the porch. His eyes were cold, his expression hard.

"Emily," he said, his voice all business, "we need to talk."

Her stomach twisted. The confrontation she had been dreading was finally here, and she knew it wouldn't end well.

She took a deep breath, glancing at Amanda and Joe. They were watching her, their faces filled with concern, but there was also something new in their eyes, something stronger. Trust. Hope.

She straightened her shoulders, her resolve hardening.

"I'll be right back," Emily said, her voice steady now. "Stay here."

And with that, she opened the door, stepping out

into the cold, the wind biting at her skin, but her heart steady. She had no idea what the next few hours would bring. But whatever it was, she was ready to face it.

* * * * *

The conversation that followed was brief, and brutal. Mr. Winters' words were sharp, calculated, and devoid of sympathy. He was done with the inn, done with the struggle, and if Emily couldn't meet his demands, if she couldn't come up with the money to buy it—he was selling it to someone else. Someone who would turn it into a chain motel, strip it of everything that had made it home.

Every word hit her like a blow to the gut, and with each one, she felt her grip on the life she had fought so hard to build slipping further away.

"I can't," she whispered, the weight of the world pressing down on her. "I can't do this anymore. It's too much."

Mr. Winters' expression softened, just a touch, but there was no empathy in his eyes. "Then, I'm sorry, Emily. It's over."

As he turned to leave, Emily felt the ground beneath

her feet shift. The storm outside seemed to swell in intensity, a mirror to the chaos that was unravelling in her own life. And yet, as she stood there on the porch, with the wind howling around her and her children waiting inside, she knew one thing with certainty.

This was not the end.

It was the beginning of something new.

She was going to fight, for the inn, for her children, for herself. She had nothing left to lose, but in that nothing, there was strength. There was power.

And with a deep breath, Emily turned back to the house, her heart full of a new, fierce determination.

"I won't let go," she whispered, her voice steady, a promise she made to herself, to her children, and to the life she was still building.

The storm outside raged on, but inside, in the warmth of their home, Emily knew that the storm within her had finally found its calm.

THE END

The prairie plate

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LENI KORHONEN

Leni Korhonen. Left calculus and part of my life for three kids and a divorce but writing never left me it's just took a few decades till i decide to expose it further than my notebooks and my computer. For best or worst it works cathartically for me.

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